



**Californians Paul Foster and Bobby Alvarez climb at Red Rock Canyon.**

**In-N-Out Burger.** Solution: an In-N-Out Burger, one of Cindy's traditions when traveling to the Southwest. What's natural about fast food, you might ask? The answer: all-natural ingredients. Founded by Harry and Esther Snyder in 1948, the In-N-Out Burger has maintained its original simple fare: only burgers, fries, and drinks free of additives, fillers, and preservatives.

The beef comes from premium cattle, is packed and made into patties by in-house butchers, and shipped daily to 233 franchises in Utah, Arizona, Nevada, and California. The Web site claims total freshness. "We don't even own a microwave, heat lamp, or freezer," it states.

**The Strip.** Our appetites were sated, but the sun had long passed over the mountains, leaving full darkness overhead. It was Saturday night. OK, let's cruise the strip. Why not?

Well, one hour and 2.5 miles of stop-and-go-and-stop-then-stop-some-more traffic later, we could offer plenty of reasons: pedestrian crowds, garish architecture and theme lighting, blaring noise, openly promoted prostitution. Once we cleared the last traffic light, we were outta there.

**Red Rock Canyon Campground.** Thirty minutes later, we set up camp under a host of bright stars and a growing, nearly full moon. Warm, dry wind blew gently through the canyon. With low, low humidity, there was no need for a rain fly over the tent. And sleep came quickly and peacefully.

**Paul Foster and Bobby Alvarez.** While eating breakfast the next morning, I noticed two men organizing rock climbing gear at the neighboring campsite. Paul Foster had been climbing for 22 years, and Bobby Alvarez for 2 1/2; they had driven 250 miles from their

homes in California to climb at Red Rock. The previous day, they had spent 12 hours ascending Epinephrine, a 2,200-foot chimney that Paul called "a stimulating climb" — thus its name, a synonym for adrenaline.

"All climbs have descriptive names," said Paul. "No Mistake. Big Pancake. Edging Skills or Hospital Bills." On the day we talked, they were going to "take it easy" with a few ascents of less than 100 feet each. "Climbing is as diverse as life," Paul philosophized.

**Red Rock Canyon Scenic Loop.** The Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area encompasses 197,000 acres within the Mojave Desert. Located 20 miles west of Las Vegas, it features wild horses and burros, big horn sheep, cacti, petroglyphs, pictographs, and ample samples of rich red rock escarpment, hundreds of feet in height, that are often contrasted, ivory-white or pale-gray striations.

The 13-mile scenic loop ascends 1,000 feet from the visitors center to the mid point, topping out at 4,721 feet above sea level. Numerous parking areas permit opportunities for photography, short walks, hiking, and rock climbing.

**Molly Sheridan.** At one of these scenic overlooks, we met Molly Sheridan, a tall, slender woman who appeared to be in her 30s. "I started running late in life, at 48," she said, adding that she was now 52. The 13-mile loop was part of Molly's daily training regimen as she prepared for the Bad Water Ultramarathon. With a distance of 135 miles in Death Valley in mid-July and an elevation gain of 13,000 feet, it is touted as "The World's Toughest Foot Race." Entrance is by invitation only.

Molly, who has run for six days across the Sahara in the Marathon des Sables — carrying her own backpack and water, no less — was to be one of 86

competitors. Of the expected 120-degree heat, she says: “The human body is amazing; it acclimates.”

Checking the Bad Water Web site in late July, I saw that Molly ran 131 miles in 45:09:17, stopping four miles short of

the finish line because of a forest fire that forced evacuation of the area. She earned an award for having completed the race in less than 48 hours. Her only rest was a 10-minute nap after 40 hours of running.

**Mojave National Preserve.** Thirty miles south, Cindy and I eschewed Interstate 15 and took the scenic two-lane road through the Mojave National Preserve, a 1.6 million-acre park of desert solitude. With topography of canyons, mountains, and mesas, its human-made features include abandoned mines, homesteads, and military outposts. A U.S. Department of Interior Web site describes its natural beauty as “singing sand

*Molly Sheridan trains on the 13-mile scenic loop in Red Rock Canyon.*



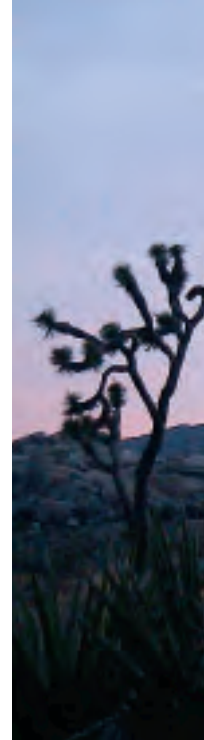
dunes, volcanic cinder cones, Joshua tree forests, and carpets of wildflowers.”

**Joshua Tree National Park.** On Sunday night, we camped at the Barker Dam Camp in the heart of Joshua Tree National Park, a 558,000-acre wilderness area that features gorgeous, scaleable boulders that nature has piled 50 to hundreds of feet high in artistic formation. The park is named for its most notable vegetation, the sparsely branched Joshua tree, a giant member of the lily family whose botanical relatives include flowering grasses and orchids. It reminded me of The Lorax tree drawn by Dr. Seuss.

In the morning, we walked and ran three miles to Barker Dam, a rain-fed basin accessible only through narrow canyon passageways. The natural rock formation was augmented with a concrete dam for cattle around 1900. Today, park wildlife drink from there — when water is present, that is. We laughed at signs, embedded in dusty ground, that warned: No Swimming.

**Cholla Cactus Garden.** Descending and letting the car coast at a comfortable 45 mph toward the southern edge of Joshua Tree, we encountered a majestic sight at the Cholla Cactus Garden where acres of sun-drenched, silver-white cacti — and some mahogany brown from age — adorn the landscape. Standing up to four feet tall, these immobile desert dwellers appear adorable, with uplifted teddy-bear arms and delicate, yellow, cup-like blossoms shaped like raspberries. But signs at the entrance to a narrow trail offer a strict warning: “Do Not Touch.” Each spear is razor-sharp and barbed. Small sections of the stalk can break off and adhere to clothing and skin; removal is nearly impossible — and painful.

**Palm Springs Aerial Tramway.** On Tuesday, we drove Interstate 10 into a



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